

# Readings in JOHN

I would ask you to cast the net of your awareness extremely widely in this lecture. I want you to hear the Gospel as it was written, and this means alerting your antennae to the whole allusive universe of the Bible. If you hear a word from John, let it resound in the Pentateuch and the Wisdom literature, the Psalms and the Prophets. The Gospel was not written swiftly, hastily, or trivially, but as part of a lengthy and widespread process, seasoned in many environments, affected by many minds, and many frames of mind. In order to hear it, you must open the recesses of your own mind and heart, formed as they have been by the same inheritance as those who collaborated to construct the sentences and movements of the Fourth Gospel.

Today we are going to study the sixth chapter of John in some detail. In order to see it steadily it will be, first of all, useful for us to recognise its kinship with the Gospel tradition at large. So first a little work is necessary to locate ourselves in the Gospel tradition.

## John and Mark

The Multiplication of the Loaves is the only miracle/sign related in all four Gospels. In two of them (Matthew and Mark) the story is actually told twice. It is therefore given unique emphasis across the traditions, and this should make us especially alert to acquire as exhaustive an understanding of it as we can manage.

The story bears particular comparison with the Markan versions (Mk 6:30-44, 8:1-10ff).

1. Both evangelists describe a multiplication of loaves for 5,000 people.
2. In both cases this is followed immediately by the walking of Jesus on the sea (as it is in Lk and after the first multiplication in Mt).
3. If we skip to the sequel to Mark's *second* multiplication, both Gospels depict Jews as *demanding a sign*.
4. Both Gospels depict Jesus as giving a discourse on bread.
5. The faith of Peter is declared after the discourse.
6. The Passion is announced by Jesus and
7. is contradicted (by Peter, in Mk) (and tacitly by Judas in Jn).
8. There is in both cases the customary distance between Jesus and the Twelve, and an atmosphere of friction between Jesus and the Jews.

We are going to discover a further complicating factor in the Gospel we are studying. In Jn, the *discourse on bread* is actually made up of two complementary sections.

- One is based on the interpretation of Jesus' language about bread as wisdom, *taught from above by Jesus*;
- the second is based on the image of bread as *the Eucharist*: a theme which rightly belongs to the Last Supper tradition. Its absence from that part of the Fourth Gospel makes us think that the second part of the ch.6 discourse in Jn is actually the material proper to the Last Supper, here displaced to illuminate or deepen the sermon on bread in the body of the Gospel narrative. This is of course theoretical speculation, but there are good grounds to endorse it, which we will explore today.

You will notice, first of all, that Mk places the multiplication after Jesus' spontaneous decision to teach the large crowd at length; it is the length of his teaching which raises the question of their feeding. The Fourth Gospel does not deal much in spontaneity, and the quality of incident and serendipity which Mark occasionally appears to employ is alien to the spirit of John. This is because the preponderant presence in every story is the mind of Jesus, and the mind of Jesus resounds to the mind of the Father: from the beginning, and at every point, he is the Word of the Father, infallibly appearing in flesh. There is nothing accidental about this appearing. John eliminates all mention of contingency.

Even when, as in the ninth chapter (about the man born blind) which we studied last time, Jesus is dramatically absent from the narrative, his disposition, intention, qualities, *modus operandi* and nature are the real subjects of the Gospel. His *absence* is symbolic only of the ignorance of those who are wrangling about him; and the resolution of the story, which takes place primarily in the mind of the man who is beginning to see, is centred in his growing faith in the one who has opened his eyes; only after the threshold of the man's excommunication has been passed does Jesus reappear, now in the fully-perceived (seen) role of one who demands faith and worship.

When we examine the structure of John's ch.6, we find that the narrative of the sign is given its own space at the beginning of the chapter. This narrative is not unlike a Synoptic miracle; only the reading of the whole chapter makes the Synoptists' use of miracle-stories look bald, unexplained, almost enigmatic by contrast.

The only setting in the narrative texture given for John's sign of the loaves is that the crowd was gathered, not because of teaching or even in search of teaching, but because of Jesus' healing of the sick - in other words, *signs*. The response of Jesus will be to give them the feeding-sign, but then to turn their minds from bread to *teaching* - a precisely opposite direction from that taken in Mark. He ascends the hill to sit down surrounded by his disciples. This must evoke two settings: firstly, the attitude of a rabbi, who would sit thus in order to teach, and the posture of Moses at the giving of the Law on Sinai - the setting chosen by Matthew for the Sermon on the Mount.

### **The Prologue and the Body of the Gospel**

Using the useful technique I recommended last time, of searching in the Prologue for the themes of the Gospel, we recall the contrast established there between Jesus and Moses:

*the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth have come through Jesus Christ.*

We thus have a referent from the Prologue to guide us: what we are about to see in Jn 6 is a mountain of the New Testament, in which the Law of the Old Testament mountain, Sinai, will be superseded by *grace and truth*. Note the word *truth*. Lateral thinking can easily connect

this announcement from the Prologue with the stream of language about *truth* flowing through the whole Gospel: and we will see that the bread-theme at the beginning of the discourse will take as its purpose the feeding of people with the bread of the truth (Jesus refers to *the true bread*). Further, it can link us with a much more dramatic terminus: the cross itself. If Sinai was the site of the Old Covenant, *Calvary* is the site of the New. This furthermore rings the far bell of the sacrifice of Christ (the Synoptists' *new covenant in my blood*); this will explain why the Evangelist or his redactors thought fit to relocate the Eucharistic language of the Last Supper on this Hill of Bread, and to amplify the original discourse on bread as *the wisdom coming down from heaven*, with the theme of *my flesh as the bread of eternal life*. The theme of covenants will continue to centre around Moses, but for the moment the Gospel is content to seal this narrative section by a simple notice: *the time of the Jewish Passover was near*.

We can see the approach of the Fourth Gospel as much more direct than Mark's. It is as *he sees the crowds approaching* that Jesus moots the question of their feeding - rather than in the much more accidental mode of the Synoptics. In this, we can see a whole habit of Johannine thought: it has a tendency to cut the corners, go to the heart of the matter, and avoid otiose incident. From this we receive a caution: don't underestimate the contents, even of a tiny verse! If it is there, it is there for a purpose; John wastes no words. A cursory reading of the Gospel will confirm that this is in direct obedience to Jesus himself, who has an extremely forthright way with questioners, especially if they come deviously or mendaciously, "seeking to trap him in something he might say".

"Where can we buy loaves for these to eat?" - a practical enough question, we may think, but questions do not remain at a merely practical level in this Gospel. Any question is, of course, a horizon; its answering is merely the setting of a further horizon, and so *ad infinitum*: or, which means for us, *ad Deum*. This particular question will resemble the Samaritan woman's: *where will you get this living water?* As by now we have had some experience of the technique of the Gospel, let us see what this question entails.

Firstly, from the context: Passover, and a great crowd following one who is healing the sick - a liberator. The first questions in the minds of the Exodus people - that is to say, their first temptations to apostasy - are precisely the questions about sustenance: *The people complained to Moses saying: What are we to drink?* (Ex 15:24 - this in the same chapter as the Red Sea Canticle). Thirst is ontologically prior to hunger. If we say that this theme has already been visited in the story of the Samaritan Woman at the Well of Jacob, we can move on to the second challenge in the desert, which comes five verses later (Ex 16:2-3):

*The whole community of Israelites began complaining about Moses and Aaron in the desert, and said to them, Why did we not die at Yahweh's hand in Egypt, where we used to sit round the fleshpots and could eat to our hearts' content? As it is, you have led us into this wilderness to starve this entire assembly to death!*

We cannot for one moment see this as the raising of a "merely" practical question. The whole viability of the Exodus is at stake, and so in particular is the whole status of Moses as the prophet of God. If indeed he has led the people out to perish of inanition, he is shown up as a sham. The judgment God has visited on Egypt, in the ten plagues, especially the last of them - the death of the firstborn - is also in question: it seems that the promised liberation is deceptive, and the slaughter of the Hebrews is simply a sequel to the slaughter of the Egyptians. In terms of provision, Egypt is suddenly proposed as a place of *security*, in contrast to the desert-situation, where the people are living precariously by faith in God and in Moses.

When Jesus, therefore, echoes their question, he echoes the whole of it: the question about food, the question about salvation, the question about the reliability of the prophet, and the question about God himself. It is, in other words, a mode of asking the great question of this Gospel, that which is under investigation *in the trial of Jesus* - that huge process which is the underlying aim of the whole Johannine project.

Jesus is said to be *putting Philip to the test, because Jesus knew what he himself would do*. This is a further instance of the elimination of the contingent; Jesus is never "making it up as he goes along". *Testing* is what habitually happens *in the desert*, and the details of this story imply distance from ordinary habitation; if there were a handy supermarket within easy reach, the question of Jesus would have little sense. In the Synoptics it is said plainly that the disciples have gone off to a place where they can be alone - a wilderness, in contrast to the towns, where they are overwhelmed with crowds - and John, without spelling it out, surely assumes the same setting. Where can we buy bread in the desert?

The reply of Philip about *two hundred denarii*, which in the parable of the vineyard-owner hiring servants would be two hundred days' wages for a labourer, means roughly *a year's wages*. For the illumination of Philip's response, we have to turn to the account in the book of Numbers 11, which will furnish us with another important ingredient in the Johannine recipe, to wit, the "murmuring" of the people. It might be of interest for us to read a good part of the chapter, since the whole atmosphere - and especially the sheer frustration of Moses before the feeble faith of the people - is more or less irreplaceable as a study-aid for our chapter, and perhaps also as a component in our approach to the Diaconate.

## Numbers 11

Philip's passage is 11:21ff, where Moses demurs at the promise of food in mathematical and economic terms - 600,000...all the flocks. The retort of God, *Is the arm of Yahweh so short?* should register with us as we watch the working-out of the sign in the Gospel.

We now have several important elements already established in the narrative: the historico-religious setting (Passover), the topography (desert), the theme of human need (the multitude), and the awareness of recalcitrance (the infidelity of the people in Numbers). All of these will be important in the sign and its sequel.

## Kings - Prophecy

Here John departs from the Synoptic tradition to give a role to a small boy. He supplies the disciples with the five barley loaves and two fish (thus making them the sort of people who would take a picnic off a small boy). *Barley* reinforces Passover, since the original feast of unleavened bread was the festival of the winter-barley harvest, from which the first new yeast of the year could be fermented. But the little boy does more:

*A man came from Baal-Shalishah, bringing the man of God bread from the first-fruits, twenty barley-loaves and fresh grain still in the husk. Elisha said: "Give it to the company to eat." But his servant (literally, boy) said: "How can I serve this to a hundred men?" Elisha insisted: "Give it to the company to eat: for the Lord says this: They will eat and have some left over." He served them, and they ate and had some left over, as Yahweh had said. - 2K 4:42ff*

The identity between Jesus and Elijah/Elisha is fairly frequently drawn in the NT; but there is a further content in the very evocation of prophecy at this point in the chapter. If we ask, "Why does Jesus perform this miracle?" the obvious answer in Mark is drawn from its introduction: Jesus said: *I feel sorry for all these people*. That is a good example of the

apparently cohesive practicality of the Synoptic account. Yet Mark 6:52 (sequel to the walking on the lake) seems to deny this simple explanation of the miracle, when it says:

*They were utterly astounded, because they did not understand about the loaves, and their hearts were hardened*

- a sense of impenetrability which is reinforced after Mark's discourse on bread in the boat at 8:21:

*"Do you still not understand, still not realise? Are your minds closed? Have you eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear? Or do you not remember? When I broke the five loaves for the five thousand, how many baskets full of scraps did you collect?" They answered, "Twelve." "And when I broke the seven loaves for the four thousand, how many baskets full of scraps did you collect?" They said, "Seven." Then he said to them: "Do you still not understand?"*

Clearly there is something more to understand here than just Jesus' compassion for a hungry crowd. If anything, we may feel that John has done us an immense favour in appending the discourse, complex as it may be, rather than these gnomic questions, which tend to leave us as stupid and slow as the original disciples, for whom one feels a profound sense of pity. The demand for the details of the story goes to emphasise the truth that the disciples can perfectly remember what happened; they are simply blind to the *meaning* of the happenings. So in Jn, the sign will be seen; its meaning will be more than can be accepted by the seers, and this will result in the classical *hardening of the heart*, which was, I recall, the trouble with that other Passover figure, Pharaoh.

Jesus has the people recline (on the plenteous grass - another Passover touch). Then he performs three of the actions of the eucharist: he *takes* the bread, *gives thanks* (the verb used here is "eucharistein", in contrast to the Synoptics' "eulogein"), and *distributes* the loaves to the people. (The omitted fourth verb is *break*; but the concept of breaking will make its appearance in the *gathering of the fragments*). The Fourth Gospel alone has Jesus himself distributing the bread, as he will at the Last Supper. The disciples gather the pieces at the command of Jesus (as the Eucharist is always celebrated "in obedience to his command" - to the point where we do this in memory of him. The word for "gathering" is eucharistic - "synagein" gives us both "synagogue" and "synaxis" - the first part of the Mass. The Greek for "fragments" is *klasmata*, which is the technical name for the consecrated hosts in early Christian literature (the mediaeval "particle").

The theme of *the Jews attempting to make Jesus king* is unique to Jn. and it brings the story to a sudden end. This is surely a further element of "testing". The third temptation in the desert for Matthew is that of the kingdoms of the earth and their splendour.

### **Jesus Walking On The Lake**

In the context of Passover, already well-established in the description of the sign, Jesus displaying his lordship over the waters is entirely at home; it is cemented by the divine name assumed by Jesus - literally, "Do not be afraid - I AM". The deed of God which seals the Exodus is the crossing of the Red Sea.

The significance of this crossing is very deep. Like the entry of Israel into the promised land in the book of Joshua, where the Jordan reprises the obedient behaviour of the sea at the Passover, the crossing of the Lake carries its own meaning in this story. The disciples are said to be making only difficult progress by themselves. Jesus' crossing is effortless, and

there is something unearthly about it. The assertion of the divine name gives this unearthliness a very clear reference: it is a divine deed. As the Israelites need to remember the divine deeds of their deliverance *in order to survive the challenge of the desert*, Jesus will demand faith in his divine origins if the people want to remain with him on the far side of this sea too.

## The Discourse

When the crowds who had been fed finally catch up with Jesus, they will question his mode of crossing: their *How did you come here, Rabbi?* can be pasted into the scrapbook with the other interrogations, like “Where do you live, Rabbi?” in ch.1, and “Where is your Father?” “Who are you?” and “Who are you claiming to be?” in ch.8, and Pilate’s “Where have you come from?” in ch.19. The answer to the question they are all asking will be the heart of the ensuing sermon:

***I have come down from heaven.***

Crossing the water is also a sign of baptism, with its themes of death and resurrection; in some sense this will be exploited by the Evangelist in his presentation of the crowd. They have responded to the multiplication in a fleshly way - and their attempt to make Jesus a king was the result. On the far side of the water, these attitudes will be arraigned by Jesus, who greets them with an accusation:

I tell you most solemnly, you are not looking for me because you have seen the signs, but because you were stuffed full of bread. Do not work for bread that cannot last; work for food that endures to eternal life

It is as if they have crossed over from the place where food meant something sheerly physical, to a new realm where the search must be for eternal bread. So catechumens, having “come ashore” from their Baptism, must not seek for the fleshly sustenance of the world, but for the true bread of eternity. The discourse on bread which follows is a long demand for the hearers to seek the teaching of Jesus rather than the bread of the body.

The first temptation in the desert in Mt/Lk is to “turn these stones into bread”; and the response from Jesus/Deuteronomy is:

*Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that come from the mouth of God.*

The contrast holds good in this chapter: the crowd persistently seek material aspirations, Jesus just as determinedly directs them to spiritual aims. He is taking bread as a place for this precise religious transition, a choice between earthly and eternal perspectives. You should notice that all the positive themes stressed by Jesus are couched in sapiential language - that is, the language of *cognition, intellectual and spiritual apprehension, and faith*; this is in profound contrast to the *eucharistic* language with which the chapter will end. Our thesis is that it is the sapiential homily which provokes the refusal of the crowd - in other words, it will form a fundamental refusal *to believe* in Jesus as the one who has come down from heaven. This homily, then, is the fulfilment, in faith-terms, of the Prologue’s assertion:

*He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world did not know him;*

*He came to his own, and his own people would not receive him*

Their failure was in *knowledge* and in *receiving*, both terms open to spiritual understanding; in the discourse we are studying Jesus constantly turns to this spiritual realm of understanding through faith.

The very Jewish question: *What must we do to accomplish the works of God?* Jesus answers with a similar transition: you must *believe* in the One he has sent. The instant request for a *sign* is an attempt to return to the practical world; but Jesus persists. Those who hunger are told to “come to me” - which sustains the language of faith. He refers to their failure again: you have seen me, yet you do not *believe*; the sign can only be fruitful if it engenders the spiritual response, *faith*. Again, all who see the Son *and believe* will have eternal life and be raised on the last day. They return to the murmuring mode to assign Jesus’ origins to the earth, and not to heaven. Jesus then speaks of the attraction exerted by the Father, in order to bring people to the Son. This is once more a theme of spiritual journeying, not a corporeal theme; and when Jesus selects his second citation of Scripture, it once more refers to the *teaching* of God, and identifies such teaching with *coming* to Jesus. Thus, we must struggle against our Catholic tendency, on hearing the words “I am the bread of life” to think immediately of the Eucharist. That is simply not what Jesus is talking about in this section; and although our understanding of the Eucharist is immeasurably enriched by this discourse, Jesus is not referring to it at this stage. He is the bread of life because he is the teaching of the Father (in terms of the Prologue, he is the Word made flesh); whoever listens to him with faith is being fed by the Father, and in coming to Jesus will find eternal life. The tendency immediately to fly to the sacramental understanding is to miss out a vital stage in the journey, and we Catholics, as a Church, may well have exemplified the poverty and damage thus caused to the people we call “the faithful”. Protestants, many of whom treat the Word of God as we treat the Eucharist, will better understand the words of this discourse than we do.

The elaboration of the first part of the discourse, dealing with bread as teaching, forms (as it were) a liturgy of the word; the second half, expounding the bread of the Eucharist, echoes the communion-service. You might like to consider whether there is a dimension here which can be related to the eucharistic change itself, which has become rather imprisoned for us in the scholastic concept of transubstantiation. What we accept about *the bread as it becomes the Eucharist* may be precisely analogous to what Jesus asks of *the people as they cross the water*. They are to leave behind their earthly motives (*bread that cannot last*) in favour of eternal ones (*bread that endures*). This is what the Scholastics were trying to express by the change of substance in the elements, or what we refer to when we say

this bread...which earth has given and human hands have made:  
it will become for us the bread of life

John’s mode is much more humane and (to us, I suggest) much more interesting and useful than the scholastic attempt to formulate.

Thus the discourse as a whole addresses the classical shape of the Mass. This is of great interest to me, as it goes some way to explain why the redactors of the Gospel chose to relocate the Eucharistic language from the Last Supper to chapter 6 (if that is what they have done).

Having said that, the coherence in the chapter is very deep. Consider a little feature like the concern of Jesus *that none of the fragments should be lost* as a model for the concern *that none of the disciples should be lost*; here the fate of the physical bread becomes analogous to the fate of those who feed on it; the language about Judas in v.70 will refer forwards to the phrase at the Last Supper:

*Holy Father, keep those you have given me true to your name, so that they may be one like us. While I was with them, I kept those you have given me true to your name. I have watched over them, and not one is lost, except the one who chose to be lost, and that was to fulfil the Scriptures (17:12)*

The “murmuring” of the Jews about the statement “I am the bread come down from heaven” takes up the “murmuring” (*gongysmos*) of the Hebrews in the desert (about the manna). This was a direct threat to the Exodus; now their descendants are threatening their salvation under the new covenant. The bone of contention is the statement that Jesus has come down from heaven; if you read the chapter with this in mind, eliminating the eucharistic doctrine from 51b to 58, you will see that the details - previously disrupted and incoherent - read with perfect consistency: the objection of the Jews is countered by Jesus with the question: *What if you should see the Son of Man ascend to where he was before?* This places the “ascent” to the Father by way of the Cross as the rebuttal of all objection to Jesus’ divine origins: the Cross is Jesus’ ultimate divine work. There is also a direct contradiction between v.54 (in the eucharistic passage) and v.63 (in the conclusion of the original discourse): in 54 Jesus equates “eating my flesh” with “having eternal life”; in 63 he says: “the flesh has nothing to offer”. Clearly, if the two verses had been composed together, they would never have come so close to contradiction.

### **The Discourse as Rabbinical Sermon**

The rabbinical structure of the homily is very clear. The surviving sermons that we know always begin with a textual quotation, whose reading is the first duty of the preacher. The preacher has to supply the tenses of the verbs, and attribute any pronouns, so that the correct reference of each of them is agreed from the beginning. The preacher then asserts his interpretation (often beginning with the honorific divine pronoun “He”). When the full significance has been reached, it was the habit of the rabbis to make a second citation from Scripture to support what had been said, and then to move to a peroration which would sum up the whole form of the argument.

Jesus is given his quotation by the crowd, and accordingly alters the tense of the verb (not past, but present) and the attribution of the pronoun (not *Moses*, but *my Father*). Instead of beginning with a statement about God (*He is*), Jesus makes a statement about himself (*I am*). From this point all the positive points of the homily are concerned with terms of expression, understanding, and belief. *Bread* itself is a wisdom-theme in the Bible as a whole, and *feeding* as the bestowal or receiving of wisdom similarly well-founded. The image of the *banquet* as an encounter with God and as the achievement of salvation is widespread. All of these things would make worthwhile areas for your private study, and I commend to you the noble Anchor Bible commentary of Fr Raymond Brown for this useful work. You will also find there an examination of the interesting work of Dr Aileen Guilding on the Synagogue Lectionary for Passover at the time of Jesus, which is a difficult area to research, but which gives credible arguments to suggest that the Jewish Passover Lectionary provides a matrix for most themes in John’s 6th chapter.

Consideration of the classical shape of rabbinical preaching is important because it gives good foundation for the feeling, which I think is certainly correct, that the eucharistic section we have outlined is indeed an import, breaking into the structure as it does, and causing a plethora of shapeless duplications, and causing the peroration to induce a misfit; this is vital for Church History, since its misconceived meaning was a genuine cause of contention at the Reformation, where a narrow understanding made it appear that Jesus was prepared to

lose his followers if they could not accept the *eucharistic* language, where the original sermon made the sticking-point the language of incarnation and in particular the extracted phrase “I...have come down from heaven and give life to the world”.

### **The Eucharistic Words of Jn 6: 51b-58**

Lastly we must consider the form of these words which appear to have been inserted. I shall say little of them, through shortage of time, except to note in them a privative construction which is to be found elsewhere in the Gospel: *ean me* means “unless”; it occurs in three strategic places where unsure or unwilling listeners are being urged to understand or accept sacramental or quasi-sacramental signs, viz.:

- 3: 5 - Nicodemus: “Unless a man be born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.”
- 13: 8 - Peter: “Unless I wash you, you can have no share in me.”
- 6: 53 - the Jews: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you have no life in you.”

This sequence might furnish a suggested re-ordering of the original text, so that the objection to the Eucharistic language emanates from the disciples (like Peter’s objection to being washed by his master) precisely because it appears to demand the death of Jesus (I can see no alternative way of his flesh becoming available for food). Such an objection would then form the Johannine equivalent of the Synoptic objection of Peter after the first prediction of the Passion. In the Synoptics, this Petrine objection elicits the Lord’s sharp rebuke of Peter as *Satanic*; Satan is already present in the Johannine last supper (entering Judas); at the end of Jn 6 Judas is identified as *diabolos*, a devil. We may also note that the Synoptic objection of Peter is placed in tandem with his profession of faith; the end of Jn 6 gives us the Johannine version of this profession. This, if the eucharistic words had stayed out of the way, would have perfectly sealed the discourse on bread as the nourishing of faith, in Prologue terms contrasting the rejection of Jesus by the world and by his own people, with the acceptance of Jesus which, the Prologue says, gives

power to become children of God, to all who *believe in his name*, born as they are not of natural generation, nor by human choice, nor by a man’s decision, but of God himself.